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AUTHOR	Striplin, Jenny J.
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ABSTRACT

This digest discusses the challenges facing first-generation students, and offers strategies for helping them to transfer to four-year institutions. A first-generation community college student attends a community college, and his or her parents have not obtained a college degree. Large waves of immigration have affected community colleges; many of these incoming students who enter the higher education system experience difficult cultural transitions. Upward mobility is the primary goal of most of these full-time first-generation college students. Academic and social challenges are often compounded for first-generation students because of family resistance to cultural and academic acclimation, which alienates these students from family support and financial resources. The struggle for first-generation students to transfer is intensified by the prevalence of poor academic preparation and low socioeconomic levels. First-generation students are often placed in vocational, technical, and/or remedial programs that impede their progress toward transfer. To increase the overall rate of transfer, enhanced counseling and advising services, as well as faculty advising, have been effective. At one college, enrollment of first generation students in Coordinated Studies Programs is also helpful in facilitating transfer. Clarification of current articulation agreements can ease the movement from two- to four-year colleges. As high-risk students, first-generation community college students require special attention, with strategies to work with that will facilitate transfer. Contains 15 references. (AS)

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University of California at Los Angeles
3051 Moore Hall
Los Angeles, CA 90095-1521
(310) 825-3931

Digest

June, 1999 EDO-JC-99-05

Facilitating Transfer for First-Generation Community College Students

by Jenny J. Striplin

Most first-generation students begin their educational trajectories at a community college (London, 1992; Rendon, 1995; Richardson & Skinner, 1992; Willett, 1989). For many of these students, a community college serves as a route towards the baccalaureate degree. However, to reach the destination of the four-year institution, these students must often overcome a variety of obstacles. This digest presents background information, describes the problem, examines the need for intervention, and identifies strategies to facilitate transfer for first-generation college students.

Defining the Terms

For the purposes of this digest, the definition of a first-generation community college student is a student who attends a community college and whose parents have not obtained a college degree (London, 1996; Mitchell, 1997; Willett, 1989). Parents' possession of at least an associate degree is considered achieving a college degree and removes a student from this category (Willett, 1989). Transfer is defined as the way in which students matriculate into four-year colleges from a community college after earning the required number of credits for transfer (Grubb, 1991).

Background

Community colleges have been affected by a large wave of immigration (Levine, 1993), and many of these incoming students are the first in their families to attend college (Rendon, 1995). After London and his colleagues (1996) interviewed hundreds of first-generation students, he found that they are exposed to new ideas and life styles as they enter the post-secondary environment. This transition to a new culture often creates an uncomfortable separation from the students' culture of origin.

For many first-generation community college students, enrolling in higher education has become a way for them to advance academically as well as socially (London, 1992). According to London, upward mobility is the primary goal of most of these full-time first-generation college students. To become a competitive applicant in today's job market, these students and their families realize the indispensability of a bachelor's or even a master's degree (London, 1996).

While some first-generation community college students experience smooth transitions to four-year institutions, others struggle during the acclimation process (London, 1989; Terenzini et al., 1993). The college environment presents new academic and personal challenges to any first-time student, but these challenges are compounded for first-generation college students (Mitchell, 1997). Their families sometimes discourage these "educational pioneers," and this can lead to alienation from familial support (London, 1989, 1992, 1996). In addition, these students are particularly susceptible to doubts about their academic and motivational abilities; they think they are not college material (Mitchell, 1997; Rendon, 1995). For first-generation students, the movement into another culture is markedly uncertain and often filled with critical self-evaluations (London, 1996). Overcoming these personal challenges is critical to successful transfer to a four-year institution (Mitchell, 1997).

Describing the Problem

From the beginning, American community colleges espoused transfer as one of their fundamental purposes (Cohen & Brawer, 1996). However, Gordon (1996) claims that transfer rates at community colleges have declined over the past thirty years. Based on an eight-year study of transfer rates, Cohen and Brawer (1996) found national community college transfer rates hovering around 22 percent. Effective methods of increasing the transfer rates of community college students have remained a topic of interest for educators and administrators alike (London, 1996).

According to Grubb (1991), a large number of community college students aspire to a baccalaureate degree. Approximately one-quarter of all students enrolled at a community college will transfer at some point in their educational careers (Komives, Woodard, & Associates, 1996). Merely expressing an intention to transfer does not always result in the intended outcome. For example, at Seattle Central Community College, the number of students intending to transfer is four times that of those who actually transfer (Gordon, 1996). Furthermore, community college students often have limited information regarding transfer (Komives et al., 1996) and this lack of information may hinder their prospective educational possibilities by mitigating their chances of actually transfering (Cohen & Brawer, 1996).

The conventional struggle to transfer is compounded by the prevalence of poor academic preparation and low socioeconomic levels of many first-generation community college students (London, 1992; Mitchell, 1997; Terenzini et al., 1993). Since college places greater academic and social demands on students than high school, college students must have the ability to adapt to these increased workloads (Mitchell, 1997). However, Mitchell notes that this problem arises because first-

generation students are often less prepared for college than their counterparts whose parents have attained college degrees.

Poor academic preparation presents a persistent obstacle to academic achievement (Mitchell, 1997). First-generation students are often placed in vocational, technical, and/or remedial programs which impede their progress toward transfer (Rendon, 1995). Rendon (1995) has found that first-generation students, in particular, receive poor counseling and advising.

Strategies to Facilitate Transfer

For many years, community colleges have regarded first-generation students as one of their primary clientele (Richardson & Skinner, 1992). In large part, the ultimate educational attainment of first-generation college students frequently depends on their overall college experiences (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Moreover, both London (1996) and Rendon (1995) maintain that community colleges have a responsibility to respond to the needs of first-generation students if faculty, administrators, and staff are committed to the success of this population.

To increase the overall rate of transfer, enhanced counseling and advising services, as well as faculty advising, have been effective. Cohen and Brawer (1996) found that the largest numbers of respondents from both high and low transfer rate colleges indicated "counseling and advising services" and "faculty advisors" when asked, "What forces within your own institution contribute to or facilitate transfer?"

Increased enrollment of first-generation students in Coordinated Studies Programs promises to facilitate transfer. Gordon (1996) found that interdisciplinary courses team-taught by faculty members from different areas of the college provide a natural bridge to four-year institutions (Gordon, 1996).

In her study of factors affecting the transfer rate of first-generation students, Rendon (1995) points out that clarification of current articulation agreements can ease the movement from two- to four-year colleges. Gardner (1996) notes that intervention can enhance the learning, retention, success, and satisfaction of these students. In addition, Terenzini et al. (1993) found that many first-generation college students expressed a desire to "feel connected" and be "a part" of their institution. Consequently, community colleges can intervene in creative ways to ensure that these students become involved in the life of their college.

Conclusion

Based on this review, it is clear that first-generation students run a high risk of not transferring to a four-year institution. Community colleges have a responsibility to respond to their needs because first-generation students are overrepresented in these institutions. In order for this group of students to reap the benefits of higher education, institutions need to keep these students on the route towards the baccalaureate. To keep first-generation students on this transfer route, community colleges must assess their respective clientele and implement strategies for success.

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